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ABSTRACT

This case study of a field and theory class examines a model designed to provide meaningful field experiences for preservice teachers while remaining consistent with the instructor's beliefs about the role of teacher education in preparing teachers for the classroom. As it turned out, the preservice teachers learned more about teaching and learning from their interactions with teachers and learners than from directions given in the college classroom. The field and theory class consisted of 34 freshmen. The class followed a new model for field experience, in which all 34 students were placed at the same school and worked in pairs with cooperating teachers. The model required a more active participation from the classroom teachers. The course included one day per week in the field, as well as college classroom instruction, and required students to keep a reflective journal. Partnerships developed between preservice teachers and with classroom teachers. As authentic questions arose in the field, efforts were made to link practice to research and to introduce the preservice teachers to the role of teacher as researcher. Results of the study suggested that field experience can reinforce rather than ignore or devalue theory, and that classroom teachers are willing and most capable of helping novice teachers develop their skills when they are included as partners in teacher education. (A substantial excerpt from one journal is included.) (ND)

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Early Field Experiences - A Model that Worked

Many individuals and organizations have called upon universities and colleges which prepare teachers to collaborate more with K-12 schools. Teacher education has witnessed a decade of increased demands for early field experience (Waxman & Walberg, 1986). Lortie has called these experiences, "the apprenticeship of observation" (pp. 61-65) and believes that the experiences reinforce the "folk ways of teaching" (Buchman, 1987). Buchman defines these folk ways as "ready made recipes for action that do not require testing or analysis while promising familiar, safe results (p. 161). Preservice teachers repeatedly say that their field experiences have prepared them for working in schools more than any college classes and label many of their college courses as "Mickey Mouse" or a waste of time (Cruickshank). It seems as though there are two opposing views of field experiences. Practitioners, particularly new teachers, value field experiences while the university is skeptical of this learn by doing approach.

As I prepared to teach my first field and theory class, I reflected on ways to satisfy the preservice teachers' zeal to "get into the classroom" and my own beliefs about how teachers learn. I knew that these first year college students were not trained in what to look for when observing learners and teachers and the interactions that exist in the classroom. I was concerned that classroom teachers would not have the time to help them work with my students as they met the challenges of more diverse learners and more directed curriculums. I thought that the preservice candidate needed to know more theory before attempting to practice. It was my belief that field experiences tend to endorse preservice teachers' misconceptions about teaching being a craft that only requires "the love of children" to be successful.

The university and the state required field hours and my responsibility was to make placements so that these hours could be fulfilled. These teaching candidates could not wait to enter the classroom. My task then was to provide field experiences that would be meaningful to these beginning teachers and would be consistent with my own beliefs about the role of teacher education in preparing teachers for the classroom.

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With these apprehensions, I approached my assigned 100 level Field and Theory class determined that every step of the field activities would be planned in the college classroom. I was determined that I would direct the classroom activities, and that I would guide the observations. I discovered, however, that what these teaching candidates learned about teaching and learning came more from their interactions with teachers and learners than from directions from the college classroom and that as the college instructor, I could best advance their knowledge about teaching and learning by helping these teaching candidates become reflective about classrooms and about how learning takes place.

Setting up the Field Experience

There were thirty-four freshman assigned to my Field and Theory Class. A list of school districts and schools had been provided. Class was had been scheduled to meet two mornings each week for three hours. The model which had been used, had the students meeting for a few sessions at the university then spending the rest of the term in the field. The university instructor served as field supervisor, attempting to visit each of the students once during the term. Since the field sites represented a large geographic area, reaching every student presented a challenge to the instructor. My first initiative was to attempt to eliminate the geographical constraints by placing my students in one school. There were attempts to dissuade me from the premise that all my students could be placed in one building. I was told that no school would accept this many novice teachers and that even if a school gave permission, the value of the experience depended on the variety of experiences. I believed that I could find a school with a serious commitment to preservice teacher education with teachers who as a group and individually were willing to work with a large number of teaching candidates. The issue of diversity would be addressed because each term a different field site would be contracted.

I spoke to a number of selected principals about considering the new model for preparing preservice teachers and about collaborating with the university to restructure the early field experience. After speaking to one enthusiastic principal, I was given permission to approach the teachers

about a new model for early field experience. The teachers heard what I had to say and were interested in being involved with these field participants. They wanted assurances that the university was not abdicating its role in preparing teachers nor "dumping" these novices on them. While they were willing to help these preservice teachers learn about learners and how to teach, these teachers did not want to be responsible for student punctuality, dress or grades. With the assurance that I was responsible for "college classroom management," the teachers and I proceeded to discuss the advantages of restructuring the field experience model that was currently in place. The current model required that the teachers were passive about what the students were observing and that they had limited interaction with the university instructor. The new model would involve the teacher with the student and the instructor.

The teachers were given the opportunity to vote on whether they wanted the new field experience model in their school and on whether they, personally, wanted to work with students. I then met with the teachers who agreed to be part of the preservice teacher preparation program.

The teachers and I worked together to develop a list of topics that would be addressed in the college classroom, a schedule for their classroom visits, and a list of activities which the preservice teachers could be responsible for in the classroom. I believe that this planning meeting between the university instructor and the classroom teachers was essential in providing a balance of theoretical and practical knowledge for the preservice teacher.

Thirty-four freshman teaching candidates were sent into the field one morning each week. They worked in pairs and were assigned to a classroom teacher. While their primary activity was to observe, they could work with learners when directed to by the classroom teacher. Each teacher who had elected to work with this project agreed to accept two students into the classroom. At first teachers were reluctant to accept two students. They voiced concern that the students would talk to one another or that they would not take their role seriously if they were working with a partner. After discussion of the need for classroom teachers to work more collaboratively and to break out of the isolation that the old model represents, experienced

teachers were more accepting of trying this new structure. The classroom teachers were open and accepting of the role of the university instructor as: the monitor of student professionalism; as a sounding board to problems that the student might be encountering; as a researcher into issues that were unclear to either the classroom teacher or the preservice teacher; and as the person providing clarification of classroom practice for the teacher candidates.

Thursday mornings my students and I were in the classrooms with the classroom teachers at least thirty minutes before the school day began. The students were able to ask questions or give a hand in the day's preparations at this time. The understanding of planning and organizations was reinforced by the preparations which they witnessed on the part of the experienced teacher. If the student had been given a reading or planning assignment, this was the time to check with the teacher. The students were expected to greet the learners as they entered the classroom. I was available at this time and throughout the morning to troubleshoot, make observations and provide consultation to both teacher and student.

The students were responsible for a reflective journal. They designed and constructed this journal working with their partner. I found these journals to be creative and a reflection of the person as student and a teacher. They were asked to write about a selected incident based on the criteria that we had set up in class and then to link this incident to theory by discussing what the incident taught them about teaching and learning. For example, one week the students learned about writing objectives. During the time before school, they asked the classroom teacher to look at the teacher's lesson plans. They watched how the plans were implemented into the classroom. They wrote and reflected upon how the plans were or were not important in the teaching and learning process.

Another day the classroom discussion focused on learner diversity. The students were asked to choose a learner whom they felt uncomfortable with, and in working individually with the learner, try to undersatnd how personal expereiences enter into the student/teacher relationship. The activity and the writing assignment allowed the preservice teachers to explore the value system that they applied to learners.

At times, areas of difficulty arose. The preservice teachers had a difficult time working with teachers who were using inventive spelling. The classroom teachers were concerned that the college students had a tendency to do for the student rather than allowing the student to spell to his or her ability. The teacher and I developed a research based lesson which would help the student understand the theory behind the inventive spelling. Part of the understanding of this concept required the field experience participants to be acquainted with the writing process. The writing process was then introduced to them as apt of the college class. It was necessary to introduce the students to the writing process to help them become better classroom practitioners.

The give and take that existed between the classroom and the university, the practice and the theory provided for a rich experience for these students. It also developed a collaborative spirit between the classroom teacher and the college instructor. The classroom teachers and I worked to help the novice teacher understand classroom practices. Each of us felt comfortable referring the students to journals and to particular teachers with expertise in an area that had emerged in the classroom as an area that the novice needed to study further.

Partnerships developed between preservice teachers and with classroom teachers. As a constant, rather than a sometimes member of this educational team, I was included in the planning and in the problems. The reflective writings were on-going dialogs which the classroom teacher and both the classroom teacher and I responded to the journal when a response was appropriate. From the field emerged authentic questions that could be addressed in the college classroom. A real effort was made to link practice to research and to introduce the preservice teacher to the role of teacher as researcher. The teacher candidates were also expected to provide research for the classroom teacher when issues that needed clarification arose. These partnerships strengthen the link between theory and practice.

The last entry into the journal was a request for the teaching candidate to describe the critical event of the term. While each of the students had spent equal amounts of time in the college classroom and

school district, each of the thirty- four students chose an event that had occurred in their field experience. The following reflective writing gives an idea of the depth of the commitment and of the novice teachers's ability to use theory to inform practice.

One Significant Event - Working with Stephanie

One of the most significant events of the term came during my field experience while working with a little girl named Stephanie. During my first visit to developmental kindergarten, the teacher explained that Stephanie did not talk. She knew how to speak but she chose not to. Stephanie responded to people by shaking her head. I was apprehensive when I heard about Stephanie because I had never worked with a child who did not speak. I was concerned that I would not give her the appropriate attention or that I would try so hard to get her to respond to me , which would make Stephanie feel defensive. The teacher told me to talk to Stephanie normally and to ask her questions to which she could respond to by nodding. As soon as Stephanie asked through the door and the teacher pointed her out, I felt myself relax. She was the cutest little girl with brown hair and big brown eyes that stared at me curiously. I sat down with Stephanie and a group of other students and to play Candyland. As we began the game, I asked Stephanie a couple of questions and she nodded "yes" to everything. She smiled a lot during the game and seemed to have fun.

During the next couple of Tuesdays, I always made sure I would go up onto Stephanie and ask her a couple of questions in order to make her feel included. I did this because many times I would look around the classroom and see many girls taking about their houses or families. These exchanges made me sad because although Stephanie would stand with the girls, she never shared any stories. It made me sad to imagine her loneliness. Whenever I looked over at Stephanie, I usually caught her staring at me. I would catch her looking at me alot during free time to see what I was doing. I always felt that she was sizing me up to make sure she was comfortable with me.

Then on April 14, an amazing event occurred. I was reading a story to Stephanie and Lori during free time. The story was about dogs and all of a sudden Stephanie spoke up and said, "I have a dog." I was surprised and excited as was Lori but I did not want Stephanie to see the shock on my face. I smiled and asked the dog's name. I waited for what seemed like an hour to see if she would answer me. She did. She told me that her dog's name was Lucy and then proceeded to describe her family's video collection at home which included 101 Dalmations. I did not want to keep firing questions at Stephanie so I simply asked if she would like to hear another story which she did. That was the only time she talked to me that day, but still what she said came out like a waterfall. Her voice was really sweet and gentle, which is what I expected it the be. I couldn't wait for her to talk to me again.

Over the next couple of Tuesdays Stephanie did not talk a great deal but she did say

a few words here and there; enough that I knew that she trusted me. Then on my last visit on May 5, Stephanie opened up like a jack-in-the- box. I was sitting playing a concentration game with Stephanie and a few other students when Stephanie started talking. Every time we would match a capital and a lower case letter that was in her name, she would say, That letter is in my name. (Stephanie is very bright and can pick out letters and numbers instantly; she also likes to help other students when they are having trouble matching letters.) Stephanie told me a variety of things. Most of her talking was about the concentration game that were playing. For instance, during the ice cream game, she told me her favorite kind was peach. Then when I would ask her a question, she would answer me and smile. She kept talking even without my asking her questions. She told me her birthday was on May 23rd and that she would be six years old. It was as exciting to hear her talk like this. I was concerned about leaving her and breaking the trust we had established. But when the classroom teacher came over she continued talking and I believed that she would continue to communicate verbally.

Working with Stephanie has taught me so much. First, she reinforced my feelings about becoming a teacher and also my love for children. She helped me learn that my learners will not all be like me and that I have to be open to differing strengths and weaknesses. I never expected that I would have a student who wouldn't talk. My teaching vision was only of "normal" children. Second, when I walked into that classroom all of the developmental psychology came rushing back to me. I was glad that I had not sold my textbook because by relating what Piaget had said about developmental levels of cognition and what Erikson said about level of trust, I was better able to understand this young learner. In theory class, we examined a variety of teaching strategies, in working with Stephanie I implemented these strategies. We practiced questioning skills. Being successful with Stephanie meant utilizing a variety of questioning skills. Through Stephanie, I learned how to rearrange questions so that a child can respond without speaking. I had no experience with children with special needs. After Stephanie spoke to me, I felt a greet deal of responsibility to respond appropriately. The classroom teacher , my professor and I discussed how Stephanie needs might best be met and how I could work successfully with her. I had a reason to find out more about special needs children and how to give them attention and still have high expectations for them in the classroom. If inclusion means that a mute child might be placed in my classroom, I know that I can teach that child. Stephanie showed me that she was much more like the other children than she was different than they were, and once my classroom teacher and my university instructor helped me learn more about special needs children, I was less afraid of Stephanie and more able to respond to her.

Stephanie taught me a great deal about communication. While I was thrilled that she spoke to me, if she had never spoken, I would still have learned a great deal about communicating. I could sense her personality through her eyes, her smile, and body motion. In fact one of my most lasting memories of Stephanie was entirely non-verbal. It came as I was learning for the last time. Stephanie ran up and gave me a long hug. As I hugged her back, I realized that no worlds were necessary to explain the emotions we both felt.

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Implications for Teacher Education

Field experiences can be developed which reinforce rather than ignore or devalue theory. Classroom teachers are willing and most capable of helping novice teachers develop their skills when they are included as partners in teacher education. As we restructure how teachers are prepared and inducted into the teaching field, we must make the process inclusive. Rather than my notion that field experiences were not based in what we know about teaching and learning, the teachers showed me a way to link field and theory and provide a solid foundation for helping these novices become more reflective about the complexities of the profession and more reflective about their role as a teacher of all learners. I believe that this student and the students in this field and theory class have learned a great deal about collaboration, about planning, about current movements in teaching such as inventive spelling and inclusion and, most importantly, about working successfully with teachers and learners. As the classroom teachers and I discussed materials which might help the teacher candidates work successfully in the field, we were strengthening the bond between the university and the classroom, between theory and practice.

Classroom teachers must be included in the teaching and learning process. Working with field sites to place participants and to plan curriculum as well as adjusting the curriculum to respond to what occurs in the classroom takes a great deal of time and energy. This time and energy is well spent. Teaching candidates reported both in their evaluations of the course and by the number of times that they chose a classroom experience as their critical event that linking theory to practice is meaningful to them. They learn by doing and by thinking about what they are doing. They learn by being guided in their classroom observations by classroom teachers and by college experiences and readings. It does not have to be theory or practice but can be theory and practice.

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